

## Negotiating the Modern, the Postmodern, and Narrative

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### **ABSTRACT:**

This inquiry of narrative comes around from Fredric Jameson's and Jean-François Lyotard's different views about modernism and postmodernism. Jameson focuses on cultural practice, and Lyotard insists on irreducible pragmatism. They are, however, rivals in their ideals, as one advocates singularity while the other promotes totality. I will first introduce into the discussion narrative's ambiguous role in the practical world. Narrative is then appraised in Jameson's and Lyotard's broad considerations. Then the focus shifts to narrative as literary concern rather than such as an agent of history or cultural mediation. In the end, emplotment in such modern and postmodern novels as Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse, William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, Toni Morrison's Beloved, and D. M. Thomas's The White Hotel lends insight into narrative as a general study.

### **KEY WORDS :**

Fiction, narrative, modern postmodern, Jameson, Lyotard, emplotment

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Narrative plays an indispensable role in asserting ourselves and understanding others. Telling a story is the most permanent act of society, according to Paul Ricoeur, and "[i]n telling their own stories, cultures create themselves" (qtd. in Kearney 24).

Fredric Jameson privileges narrative in his *The Political Unconscious* because it sums up human experience, which is history, the total that subsumes everything, every other structure, be it structural, post-structural, or psychoanalytical. "[T]he cognitive authority which Jameson consigns to 'narrative' as a 'socially symbolic act' derives from his conviction of the 'narrativity' of the historical process itself," observes Hayden White (Green 6).

Narrative so understood, besides being a form to carry a story, is an epistemological category. We come into contact with the world shaped as a narrative, which is shared collectively, as Ricoeur also observes. At the function of narrative we imagine society in the stories we tell, but, as Jameson specifies, they not only incorporate the everyday surface details but more importantly domesticate the underpinning conflicts, so these stories are complex and ideologically motivated (Dowling 115).

Jameson advocates a sophisticated understanding of text as well as society. Rather than a simplistic reflected product, the text is paradoxically both "a symbolic *act* and a *symbolic act*" (Dowling 122). Jameson, taking Kenneth Burke's suggestion, accords genuine value to literature as something that matters, but withholds its credit as a transparent vehicle that catches the world as it is. It entertains an active, but oblique relation with the world.

What is therefore the symbolic act of literature takes on a negative dimension in Jameson's investigation. The symbolic does not designate richness and derivation of meaning as for Ricoeur but, more like in Kristeva's speculation, it signals curtailing and tyranny in the socialized order. It is symptomatic of concealing and repressing a knowledge of social struggle, and its recording bears the imprint of this fissure and discordance. In this way, the original writer is one "whose political unconscious is active, that is to say, resistant to his ideology" whereas the commonplace writer is completely deceived (Berthoud 105). The original writer "experiences the tension between historical pressure and ideological resistance that constitutes his originality" (Berthoud 105-6).

Continuing this project of social reading of cultural texts, Jameson maps a postmodernist logic in the present stage of late capitalism. Erosion of key boundaries makes way for commercial forms to be incorporated in high art, not as "quotations," but to the point unseparated between the two realms, Jameson observes ("Consumer" 14). Modernists' unique styles are unmistakable individual signatures; one is not to be confused with another, but this is not the case with many postmoderns ("Consumer" 15). The modernist parody gives way to the postmodernist pastiche. The former maintains an intention to comment; the latter a neutral mimicry, little motivated by a latent purpose to make difference (16). "Death of the subject" is the ambience. It turns away from the modernist aesthetic, which is "in some way organically linked to the conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unique, unmistakable style" (17).

Jameson's critique is fully developed in his book *Postmodernism*. Jameson's most audacious insights lie in pointing out the politically debilitating paradox in which "postmodernism's declaration of emancipation from the older meta-narratives and totalities feeds into the market's decentered logic which encourages de-territorialization only in order to effect a greater penetration and colonization of the globe" (Li 135). The postmodernist's anti-systematic nominalism valorizes multinational capital's proliferation in the name of difference, and prevents its decentered network from being conceptualized and exposed.

Jean-Francois Lyotard sustains positive views on this recalcitrancy in the postmodern culture that Jameson condemns. Coming from another perspective, Lyotard denounces the totalizing theory as terror, and expresses suspicion about any grand system's attempt to subsume every aspect of experience. In the

computerization of society, Lyotard thinks, postmodernism points to a replacement of universalism by localism, and therefore a freedom from being totalized into an alien structure. To affirm partial truth does not entail renouncing the ethical responsibility to society. There is still injustice to fight, but the concern can only "legitimate local and essentially defensive interventions" rather than providing the ground for a narrative of universal emancipation and fulfillment (Bennington 8). To respect heterogeneity as it is is a more responsible attitude in a dispersed society than the prescription to reclaim the lost unity (Bennington 8).

To replace the disenchanting large-scale narratives, Lyotard advocates singularity. "A singularity is not so much an individual as an *event*"; therefore, individualism is not the counter force against the totalizing fantasy. The Jews' historic calamity in the Second World War, such as in Auschwitz, is an exemplary event. No words or memory can adequately convey it. Despite its scale, any "event" partakes of this irreducible status. Lyotard's work strives to respect the integrity of the event, which "refuses to be absorbed in the *order* of a classical narrative" (Bennington 109). Narrative reference always entails another narrative, and event is not to be reduced to referent (Bennington 111).<sup>1</sup>

In Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, narrative claims to underline all forms of verbal knowledge. In his analysis, Lyotard demonstrates that though scientific knowledge is nonnarrative in its procedures, it nevertheless depends on narrative knowledge at a deeper level to legitimate its truth (*Postmodern Condition* 28). Lyotard attempts to redescribe that theoretical genre is, in fact, a narrative genre (Bennington 110). Despite its rational appearance, theory cannot sublimate the residual earthiness underneath its programming. In Lyotard's assumption, narrative is the "other" of theory's "scientific" assertion.

Narrative is understood as a figure. It insists that "the necessarily narrated quality of events marks them as radically singular happenings" (Readings 76). Narrative is not a concept through which we unlock the meaning of culture (Readings 63). It is the irreducible part of an event, which does not yield to logocentric representation (Readings xxvii). Narrative is basic and primal; "everything is narrative" is an aphoristic way of putting it. For Bill Readings the maxim means "the condition of narrative is unsurpassable" (65). Any theory initially will recourse back to narrative, and "[i]t is this account of narrative as *figure* rather than *concept* that preserves Lyotard's analysis of the narrativity of

political, aesthetic and philosophical discourse from mere relativism" (Readings 84).

While Jameson presents a nostalgic reaction in desiring to renew the threatened social bond in the Marxist Utopia, Lyotard thinks a totalizing judgement is unjust to the many strands of the social fabric which resist translation into a common sense. Habermas believes that "consensus" in knowledge is possible, whereas for Lyotard "consensus is only a particular state of discussion, not its end" (Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition* 65).

For Jameson modernism is the incomplete version of postmodernism. We still find fissures in modernism to allow critical distance which postmodernism has intruded with its capitalist logic to commercialize and spacialize (see *Postmodernism* 310, 343). The thematics of time and memory so important to modernism affords a dimension of thinking history from within (Nicholls 1). In the flattened landscape and the depthless presentness of the postmodern age, Jameson misses the arts in the older period, which still reacted disputantly and subversively to the modern society (28).<sup>2</sup> For Lyotard, the modern epoch is obsessed with "master narratives," which are seemingly unrifted narratings of the world. The reliance on grand narratives is shattered by the outpouring of an alterity or "other" in the postmodern.

In Warren Montag's view, to read Lyotard, Baudrillard, Jameson, Eagleton, Habermas, and Perry Anderson is to see the forgery of postmodernism. In the debate these irreducibly divergent forces are paradoxically united to force knowledge back to the domain "properly" charted by the established theoretical order (88). Literature resists being totally contained by theory, Montag argues. What worried Plato was not literature's falsity, immateriality, and indeterminacy but its materiality, overdetermination, and complex effects. "Art and writing torment the Platonic system because they are unthinkable within its terms. They constitute a reality that must be denied because it cannot be grasped. But in every charge levelled against art, it is its materiality that is described," comments Montag (89). Philosophy is supposed to enlighten the world while art, with its irreducible thingness, escapes the control of the determining form, and is therefore denounced as mere appearance, as "illegitimately begotten" (89).

When it comes to Lyotard, Montag's criticism, I think, is directed at Lyotard's also "grand" speculation concerning a paradigm shift of legitimating knowledge in the classic, modern, and postmodern modes. Literature seems to

take on the modern or postmodern features simply as a cultural category, and is thus compartmentalized as a form of knowledge.

Here the problem partly results from the transgressive character of the modern and the postmodern as history and as literature, I contend. Modernization since the Renaissance and modernism since late nineteenth century often get confused; i.e., we should carefully distinguish modernization seen as a long span of historical development with a trajectory, and modernism seen, so from a historical perspective, as a special way of representation coupled with a corresponding aesthetic and epistemology during the late period of modern history. Lyotard's postmodern condition is the turning away from a previous historical maneuver already fomented by modernism. This shows our struggling to say something by such multivalent terms as modern and postmodern, a not unique difficulty also troubling our use of classicism, romanticism, realism, and any taxonomy in the human studies.

In "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?", Lyotard maintains that both modernism and postmodernism (in terms of art) are constituted by the presence of ideas of which no presentation is possible. The "unpresentable," in a Kantian sense, imparts no knowledge about reality, obstructs the free union of the faculties which give rise to the sentiment of the beautiful, and prevents the formation and stabilization of taste (78). Lyotard considers the stake of art since modernity to "make visible" what is not seen. In the same essay, Lyotard also makes the paradoxical statement that the postmodern is the nascent state when a work can become modern (79). The postmodern foregrounds the unpresentable in presentation which the modern has managed to cope with in good forms.<sup>3</sup> The postmodern constantly pushes back the frontiers of representation, to expose the uncharted area of the unimaginable beyond the reach of a Kantian reason.<sup>4</sup>

To concentrate more on modernism vs. postmodernism as literature, I will address the issue of stylistic change, a most readily "literary" element. Modernists are stylists as postmodernists are not; i.e., postmodern novels have their peculiar style: the lack of their predecessors' preoccupation with style. This is, of course, a more or less simplified division that may be adjusted according to each single case, especially for those works in the transitional period.<sup>5</sup>

The modernist novel shows at least in appearance little interest in narrative as it is, and is preoccupied with stylistic experiment (Lodge 5). "The modern novel evolved through an increasing dominance of mimesis over diegesis,"

observes Lodge (37). The modernist aesthetic, such as showing rather than telling, requires the retreat of diegesis (37). The modernist novel celebrates mimesis, and attempts in every effort to get rid of mediation, or to be more precise in its traces.

One of the mediations constantly lurking in the writing is the mediator, the author. Post-modernism makes a shift to let the mediator come back into the text. The reintroduction of the author's speech makes way for the revival of diegesis. Metafiction, found in the postmodern and premodern writers, is rarely found in the great modernist writers, says Lodge. The self-exhibitionistic postmodern fiction exposes the fundamental source of the novel's diegesis, the author, "in a way which ran[sic] counter to the modernist pursuit of impersonality and mimesis of consciousness" (Lodge 43). Metafiction's uncovering the narrative voice as a rhetorical construct, the author as a function of his own fiction, is seen as evidence of postmodern fiction's privileging diegesis. The stream of consciousness has turned into a stream of narration.

The above observation is very true with the postmodern elements in *Beloved* and *The White Hotel*. Story makes its grand return in fiction, and once more becomes a crucial mediation. People in *Beloved* never cease telling stories. They find solace and justification in telling stories, and by this way make up a history lost to even those who should feel most dear to it. *The White Hotel* overtly privileges narrative and overdoes it. In its excess of narrative, *The White Hotel* gains, most of the time in a monotonous, flat tone, a kind of narrative pathos and narrative hysteria though it loses in a first-hand, direct presentation of psychological depth of the heroine.

In pursuing a rigorous form to its limits, modernism filters, distills, and refines all the base feelings and facts of love, sex, death, and war, or even ennui, boredom, and impotence until they shine in a masculine sinewy body. In burning out the mediation for a more direct representation, modernism tends to be symbolic. At the exercise of discipline of impersonality, the artist is withdrawn from his work. A modernist insistence is that an artist should be known solely through his fiction as his work will speak for him (Budd 35-6). There is an identification between the mind and personality and the work created (Budd 50). The reader is looking for a Romantic visionary, and the artist demonstrates paradoxically a sense of an imperial self (Budd 52).

Postmodernism is representation of representation. It externalizes the skeleton, and dances like a puppet with all threads visibly around. Clanking and

clashing, postmodernism jingles an allegorical overtone. In modernism, the wrestling is more between the writer with his work while circulating in the literary discourse of postmodernism is the mundane existence of people and event, including the artist and the art.

The distinction between modernism and postmodernism may be further pursued by examining their relations with history. The former is remarkably distinguished by its quest for art's autonomy and supremacy over history while the postmodern discourse reinstates the conventional as may be summarized in the return of history. Postmodernism triggers reassessments of the historical, the mutable, the contextual, the political, the ideological--the mundane, in short. Modernism struggles to break away from these barriers in search of a form. Postmodernism returns to deal with them with distance, recruiting them into play, into incessant dialogue. This postmodern confrontation with history, albeit not the history of political struggle in Jameson's sense, complements and compensates modernism in not turning away from the profane.

This is not simply saying that modernism is "ahistorical." The modernist's "ahistorical" propensity, as it were, demonstrates an urge for uniqueness, to create order by and in art, to make an alternative world in literature, language, and imagination. Equally accused of being "ahistorical" by Jameson, postmodernism may be seen as liberation from the dictate of striving for being original, an illusion as well as a worthy cause.

Another most immediate mediation of literature is language. For Saussure, language is a two-sided sign, signifier and signified, and for Bakhtin a two-sided *act*, the addresser and the addressee (Lodge 90). Derrida's writing, recalling Wittgenstein, forgoes the word's pretension to manifest some transcendent logos or a theological presence.<sup>6</sup> Writing has become the entire space of culture, and meaning is encoded in language.

Reference to and representation of the real become very problematic. Emplotment since modern fiction takes into consideration multireality, and sometimes makes it the theme of the novel. *To the Lighthouse* deliberately recurses to an antinarrative emplotment, and makes a paradigm of plotless plot. Woolf makes eventful the seemingly eventless myriad moments, which defy a simple-minded narrative. *The Sound and the Fury* has more story to tell, but subordinates it to the inter-play of loss, femininity, virginity, resentment, and speculation about time to avail an unspeakable defeatism as well as beauty.



In *Beloved* and *The White Hotel* the importance of story cannot be overstated, but story is pivotal in these two novels because it functions like other mediations, answering and competing with each other. Hence Morrison appeals to the ghost to speak what is invisible but oppressively there, and Thomas's dialogical novel redefines the plot as one which can be molded, questioned, and reassembled like other narrative elements.

From plotlessness to excess in plot, emplotment since modern fiction is much exploited to bare what is unspeakable in a reality that is not one but many. Not a single plot is sufficient enough to tell all stories, and that is why we keep experimenting with emplotment, even at the expense of its collapse.

Narrative structure after experiments explored by modern and postmodern fiction no longer denotes a primitive, teleological construction, which suppresses any barrier along its way in order to yield a story. The ideal is still there: to make as coherent a tale as possible. Narrative is a vehicle by which one can compose a Hegelian history, which unfolds some essence in accordance with some necessary laws, or one can make a counter story of Heideggerian historicity that opposes historicism. One can make progress, democracy, the people, or the proletariat as the subject of the narrative, or one can tell stories of disintegration, alienation, and depression. There will be the Narrative, against which other narratives test their relations with each other in terms of a system. And there will be narratives, which question the faith the Narrative demands to accomplish its validity. History in this way is open, not prewritten, and welcomes all contributing thoughts to put to narrative the unthinkable, either utopia or heterotopia.

### Notes

1 An event is not a thing, "but at least a caesura in space-time" (Lyotard, qtd. in Readings xxxi), and by "the event" Lyotard is naming "the radically singular happening which cannot be represented within a general history without the loss of its singularity, its reduction to a moment" (Readings 57). Its singularity is "alien to the language or structure of understanding to which it occurs." That "it happens" cannot be reduced to and identified with "what happens," remarks Readings (57). Radically speaking, after any event nothing is the same again.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin presents a counterpart Marxist viewpoint about depthless arts. He hails "the age of mechanical reproduction" although he cannot help missing the aura emitted from the "depth" of classic arts. Benjamin argues that at the expense of uniqueness, arts, like photography and film, can "politicize" matters that have been aestheticized. See Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

<sup>3</sup> In Lyotard's postulation, early modern aesthetic innovation may be said to seek "a new truth or a new way of telling the truth," and late modernist innovation a new truth in the experience of telling (Readings 74). Innovation refines the efficiency of the system because it consists of making new moves within the existent discourse and by this way revivifies it (Readings 73). Postmodern art does not make truth claims at all, but seeks to testify to an event which refuses to be conceptualized and made a perceptible object by representation, and thus rejects being assigned to a truth (74). This is why Lyotard says the postmodern precedes the modern condition.

<sup>4</sup> "Lyotard still has praise for the modernist avant-garde's work of anamnesis, the failure to forget that does not allow itself the solace of representation," observes Readings (xxviii).

<sup>5</sup> Those novelists immediately after the peak of modernism, like Barth, Barthelme, Pynchon, have mixed high seriousness and extravagant stylistic displays with unexpected twists that signal different literary awareness. They may be called the early postmodernists.

<sup>6</sup> "[F]or Wittgenstein language is constitutive of our world, whereas for Heidegger language provides our access to Being. Heidegger's thought is religious in that it aims at finding those conditions of possibility that, Heidegger claims, once allowed the sacred to appear," observes Thiher in *Words in Reflection* (35).

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